

## **The Ballot Stealing Caper** **By Dennis Powers**

The charismatic orchardist and publisher of the *Medford Daily News*, Llewellyn Banks, became sharply critical during the Great Depression over the depressed conditions in Southern Oregon. He and Earl Fehl--a Medford contractor and businessman--joined forces to create a power base that took form as the Good Government Congress ("GGC").

Banks had a powerful forum in his daily column, "Once in a While," throughout 1931-1932 that blamed the region's economic problems on different factors, ranging from the Federal Reserve Bank to the "local corrupt Courthouse Gang." The battle raged between the GGC/*Daily News* and the *Medford Mail Tribune* with its editor, Robert Ruhl, who wrote editorials urging people to uphold "rationality and fairness."

In the November 1932 elections, Earl Fehl won election as a county judge and another GGC supporter, Gordon Schermerhorn, won the sheriff's office. Tensions continued to mount between the two forces and the newspapers; the *Mail Tribune* was threatened with sabotage, and Robert Ruhl ordered his printers armed with shotguns and to guard the presses at night. Named the "Green Springs Mountain Boys," a group of young roughnecks guarded Banks and Fehl.

Reports of irregularities in the balloting led to a state-ordered recount when state politicians became concerned over these developments. Acting upon orders from Banks and Fehl, men at night broke into the county courthouse on February 20th, 1933, in Medford through a rear, ground-floor window. They stole thousands of ballots from the vault with the next day set for the vote recount. The GGC's gamble was that it could stop any later investigations when its sheriff hired the deputies that he wanted.

Oregon State Police began their investigations after officials discovered the missing ballots. The state police found burned ballot pouches in the courthouse furnace, and then more ballots were discovered floating in the Rogue River. After two young Good Government Congress members confessed to their role, the police began to arrest the culprits. In mid-March of 1933, Constable George Prescott headed in the morning to the home of Llewellyn Banks for his arrest.

Answering the door, Banks' wife came to the door, but upon seeing Prescott, she started to close it. When the policeman put his foot down on the doorstep, Banks stepped over with a rifle and fired bullets through Prescott's left hand and chest. He died on the spot, although three supporting officers at the scene tried to revive him.

Once word of the murder came out with the bad publicity, the GGC movement basically stopped in its tracks, as hundreds of its members said that they weren't part of this party or ever active. The trials of the involved conspirators lasted into late 1933. For the murder, Banks was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. Fehl was also convicted and sentenced

to jail for his role in the ballot stealing, as was the incumbent sheriff, county jailer, a Rogue River mayor, the ballot stealers, and others.

Although *The New York Times* and *San Francisco Chronicle* won Pulitzer Prizes in 1934 for their reporters, the jury also selected the *Medford Mail Tribune* for its “meritorious public service” gold medal in its reporting against the “unscrupulous politicians in Jackson County, Oregon.” The award acknowledged the role of editor and publisher Ruhl for his part in resisting the GGC in what is also called the Jackson County Rebellion. Banks died in the penitentiary in 1945 at age 73; however Fehl was paroled, returned to Medford, and lived until 1962.

Sources: Jeff LaLande, “The Oregon Encyclopedia: Good Government Congress (Jackson County Rebellion),” at [Good Government Congress](#); Cleve Twitchell, “MT's Pulitzer-winning editorials tackled corruption, violence,” *Mail Tribune*, November 2, 2009, at [Mail Tribune and the Pulitzer Prize](#); Kay Atwood and Dennis J. Gray, “The Oregon History Project: Boom & Bust: Political Turmoil in the 1930s”, at [Historical Overlook](#).